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ABSTRACT

Information was collected in 1993 from students who withdrew from courses in mid-term at a community college either because they were dropping a course or departing from the college. This report documents withdrawal patterns of students during the calendar year of 1994. Self-reported reasons for course/college withdrawal were identified and differences in withdrawal patterns across gender, ethnic, age groups, and academic curricula were identified. A Student Withdrawal Form, which is appended, was used to gather information on 15,918 withdrawals. Findings included: compared to actual enrollments, students withdrew from courses in the natural and physical sciences at a disproportionate rate, and mathematics represented the largest number of students within this group; allied health and public service had much lower withdrawal rates than their enrollments would suggest; when students withdrew from natural/physical science courses, they were more likely to retain other courses at the colleges, while when they withdrew from allied/technical courses, there were more likely to be departing from the college; there were few differences across curriculum areas for gender and racial/ethnic groups; the most common reason cited for withdrawal was conflict with work; more than 1,200 students who withdrew from the college felt the college could have prevented the withdrawal and cited reasons for their view. The student withdrawal form is attached. (Contains 11 references.) (SW)

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An Analysis of Student Motivations for Withdrawal in a Community College

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This paper was presented at the Thirty-Fifth Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at the Boston Sheraton Hotel & Towers, Boston, Massacusetts, May 28-31, 1995. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum Papers.

Jean Endo
Editor
AIR Forum Publications

An Analysis of Student Motivations
for Withdrawal in a Community College

ABSTRACT

Educators in community colleges continually strive to both attract and retain students. In an effort to provide informative data regarding student withdrawal, the college began in 1993 to systematically collect information from all students who withdrew from courses at the college. The report that follows documents withdrawal patterns of students during the calendar year of 1994. This study provides information about students who choose to withdraw from courses mid-term; the student withdrawals considered in this study cannot be assumed to represent "drop-outs" according to the commonly understood definition. Some of these students are departing from the institution entirely (complete withdrawal), others are simply "dropping a course" and forfeiting varying amounts of tuition (partial withdrawal). This study provides insight into the prominence of various self-reported reasons for withdrawal, and examines the differences in withdrawal patterns across gender, ethnic, and age groups as well as ability levels, and academic curriculum clusters.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Recruitment and retention of students is an issue that is not unique to community colleges, but is compounded by lingering image problems faced by these institutions. Community colleges have come under fire by researchers who have asserted that community college attendance does not increase, and in many cases actually reduces student educational aspirations and occupational goals (Astin, 1972). Others assert that community college attendance serves to maintain social class distinctions and hinders social mobility for students (Grubb, 1984; Karabel, 1986). In an early indictment, Clark (1960) likened attendance at a public two-year college to educational "tracking" in which students from predominantly lower-middle-class backgrounds are discouraged from attaining four-year degrees and are trained in fields and processes that tend to classify them as less-educated than persons who receive their education at four-year institutions. More recent work points to concerns that the administrative processes (e.g., admissions standards), curricula, and socialization agents (e.g., faculty, staff, peers) at public two-year institutions tend to reinforce existing class differences, and inhibit social mobility for students (e.g., Karabel, 1986; Grubb, 1984).

These claims do not go unchallenged, as other research highlights the fact that attending any college, including a community college, promotes upward social mobility in those students when one compares them to persons who terminated their formal academic training with high school (Nunley & Breneman, 1988). Further, Bean and Metzger (1985) suggest that employers increasingly expect a minimum of an associate degree for entry level technical positions and other skilled vocational positions. These types of findings strengthen the assumption that community college attendance (not necessarily degree attainment) is primary for participation in some occupations and therefore is essential for persons who are interested in vocational options in technical fields.

While the debate continues regarding whether community college attendance promotes or inhibits student achievement, social mobility and career goals, community colleges continue to grow in size and number, and currently enroll nearly half of all postsecondary students (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 1991). Assertions that community colleges suppress student

educational attainment have primarily grown from the fact that community colleges suffer from high levels of attrition, transfer difficulty, and attrition after transfer (Dougherty, 1987). Attrition from community colleges is now, and should continue to be, an important area for research. Evaluation of course and college withdrawal patterns is essential to a comprehensive view of student attrition, and can be instrumental in the development of intervention strategies that can be used to encourage greater student persistence.

Given the economic impact of attrition on institutions of all types, it is not surprising that a tremendous amount of research has been conducted on student dropout. Some researchers have concluded that high attrition rates in community colleges may be a function of their lack of prestige in the postsecondary arena, and lack of social integrative opportunities (such as residential facilities) for students (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) suggest that students' perception of their institution's level of prestige influences student commitment to the institution (consistent with the work of Tinto (1975) on student dropout); while lack of social in egrative mechanisms might negatively influence student social integration and involvement (as defined by Astin, 1973). It is also important to consider that community colleges today enroll much higher numbers of "non-traditional" students[1] than do four year institutions. The non-traditional student, by virtue of his/her age, commuter or part-time status, is more likely to be juggling school with other personal issues (e.g., work, health, child care issues, family demands, transportation). Further, Bean and Metzger (1985) report that non-traditional students are more likely to be attending college for vocational reasons, yet are less likely to actually complete degrees. Student *self-reports* of their reasons for withdrawal (both from courses and from the college) is a compelling area for research on community college attrition, yet little research has been published regarding student reports of their reasons for withdrawal.

This study is designed to investigate what relationship exists between selected background variables (including age, race/ethnicity, gender, and academic preparation[2]), course-related variables (e.g., curricular area, instructor, course not what student expected, scheduling) and

[1] Non-traditional students are often defined as commuter students, students who are over the age of 25, and part-time students.

[2] As established by standardized test scores on the ASSET Reading, ASSET Math, and ASSET Language tests.

personal/situational variables (e.g., transportation, child care, work conflicts, financial problems, medical reasons) with regard to course and college withdrawal. The analysis provides an initial view of what types of withdrawing students are likely to engage in discussion of their academic future with faculty and staff at the college, and to what extent those discussions are related to the student's desire to re-enroll at the college at a later date. The findings help us to understand the dynamics that are present in students' decisions to withdraw as well as the role that faculty and staff play in those decisions.

Three primary research questions guide the study:

1) Are there differences in patterns of withdrawal among students enrolled in courses from different curricular areas?

2) What is the relationship between student academic preparation, age category, gender, and race/ethnicity and self-reported reasons for withdrawal?

3) To what extent do students discuss their withdrawal with teachers and counselors?

Much of the literature on student attrition has been devoted to "drop-out," a process by which the individual either withdraws from all his/her courses mid-term, or fails to return to the institution after completing one or more terms. This study is unique in that it provides significant evidence of course and college withdrawal patterns that has heretofore been scarce in the literature. We conduct a preliminary analysis of data from over 15,000 withdrawal transactions at a multicampus community college. The analysis is limited by several factors that are explained in the "Limitations" section, yet the study provides important descriptive and exploratory information that will help enrollment management personnel to consider the ways the college might work to reduce the number of mid-term withdrawals in the future.

METHODOLOGY

In response to a significant push to provide a "student-centered" environment at the college the official *Student Withdrawal Form*[3] was revised in 1993. The college is committed to providing students with an environment that is conducive to learning, and to use student feedback to make adjustments in policies and procedures based on data rather than intuition. The new form explicitly requests information from students that is essential to informed decision making at the college. The expanded *Student Withdrawal Form* serves five primary purposes:

1) to obtain information necessary to process the student's course withdrawal request,

2) to obtain information about the student's self-reported reason for withdrawal,

3) to determine to what extent college personnel were involved in discussing the withdrawal with the student,

4) to identify whether the student intends to re-enroll at a later date (if he/she is withdrawing from all courses at the college), and

5) to inquire whether the student would like to be contacted by college personnel to discuss his/her withdrawal.

Each time a student wishes to withdraw from a course at the college, he/she is asked to complete a *Student Withdrawal Form*. The student is asked to indicate the year and session of the withdrawal, information about veteran's and social security benefits, and the number of credits before and after the transaction. The student is then asked to indicate specific reasons for their withdrawal from the following list:

* Transportation Problems
* Conflict with Work
* Moving Out of the Area
* Financial Reasons
* Conflict with the Instructor
* Medical Reasons
* Child Care Problems
* Registration Error
* Course Too Difficult
* Course Too Easy
* Course Scheduling Conflict
* Personal Reasons
* Course Not What I Expected
* Other

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[3] If a student is withdrawing from one course and, concurrently, adding another, a "Drop-Add Form" is used. The Student Withdrawal Form is only used when the course being dropped is not being replaced by another.

If the student is withdrawing from all his/her courses (e.g., withdrawing from college) he/she is asked to indicate whether he/she intends to re-enroll at a later date. Four additional questions include "Have you discussed your withdrawal with your instructor,"[4] "Have you discussed your withdrawal with a college counselor," "Would you like someone from the college to contact you to discuss your withdrawal or your future educational needs?"[5] and "Could anything under the college's control have prevented your withdrawal?" If the respondent indicates that his/her withdrawal could have been prevented by the college, he/she is asked to provide a short narrative description of what the college did/failed to do that contributed to the withdrawal. Finally, the student is asked to provide information about the course, including course code, section number, course title and credits.

After the student completes the *Student Withdrawal Form*, it is first processed by the registration and records department, then is forwarded to the Office of Institutional Planning and Analysis, where the student's responses on items 2 - 5 (above) are data entered. If a student indicated that he/she would like to discuss the withdrawal with a counselor, a copy of the form is forwarded to the student's home campus[6]. If the student indicates that he/she would like to discuss the withdrawal with college personnel, the form is forwarded to the college counseling office for follow-up.

The Sample

The data for this study were collected from the *Student Withdrawal Forms* completed by students at a large, multi-campus, predominantly white, affluent, suburban community college, in the Fall, Winter and Spring/Summer terms of 1994. The unit of analysis is the individual withdrawal transaction. A student may complete more than one withdrawal form during the course of a given term, and may cite more than one reason for their withdrawal. The form allows

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[4] If a student is withdrawing from the course(s) after the official withdrawal period (approximately 11 weeks after the beginning of the term) he/she must see the instructor to receive a "W" on the transcript. Failure to see the instructor after the withdrawal date will result in an automatic "F" in the course.

[5] If a student indicates that he/she would like to be contacted by the college regarding his/her withdrawal, one copy of the withdrawal form is automatically forwarded to the college counseling office for follow-up with that student.

[6] "Home campus" refers to the campus at which the student initially enrolled for classes. Courses may be taken at any of the five campuses. The withdrawal forms are pre-coded to indicate the student's home campus.

for up to four courses to be included on one withdrawal form; however, the present analysis only considers those withdrawal transactions that include a single course, in order to assure that the "reason(s) for withdrawal" cited by the student are referring to only that one course. Some withdrawal transactions result in a simple reduction in the number of credits the student is taking at the college *(partial withdrawal)*, while other transactions represent withdrawal from the college entirely *(complete withdrawal)*. The analysis has been conducted separately for those two withdrawal categories. Separate analysis has also been conducted with regard to gender, race/ethnicity, age category, and curricular area.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through frequencies, and crosstabs to identify patterns of withdrawal for various categories of students. Data from students who were withdrawing from the college entirely (*complete withdrawal*) were analyzed separately from students who were withdrawing from one course, yet continued to be enrolled in other course(s) at the college (*partial withdrawal*).

RESULTS

The entire database (15,918 cases) was used for this study. When analyzing the data we had many options regarding how to present the results. For this paper, we present the aggregated data in percentages only. We did not attempt to look at significance on most variables as the number of records was too high to provide meaningful results. On the few variables for which we provide significance values we use a p value of less than .001. Although we have provided an analysis of the data by curricular area, we do not provide a breakdown of reasons for withdrawal across those curricular areas. We intend to provide a follow-up analysis in a future paper that will look at each curricular area and the most important reason given by students for withdrawing. The analysis is presented in the order suggested by our three research questions. The analysis of the first two questions is separated into two parts: *partial withdrawals* and *complete withdrawals*.. A sample of the narrative information received as a response to the question "Could anything under [the college's] control have prevented your withdrawal?" is presented to show the type of information that might be analyzed in a future qualitative study of student withdrawal. It is important to note that we only considered withdrawal transactions that included

a single course for this analysis in order to obtain an accurate picture of their reasons for withdrawal.

ANALYSIS

The database contained 15, 918 withdrawal transactions, of which 8,814 were made by women and 7,099 by men[7]. We analyzed all the results by both gender and course area. Course area was determined by aggregating course disciplines into eight categories. These categories appear in Table 1. Other variables we used for analysis included the student's ethnicity, cumulative GPA, college preparedness (as measured by the entrance exam ASSET), and self-reported reasons for withdrawal.

Table 1- Curriculum Areas & Sample Disciplines

Curriculum Areas	Sample of Corresponding Disciplines
Allied Health	Dental Fields Medical Fields Nursing Health Care Administration
Natural and Physical Sciences	Biology/Chemistry/Physics Mathematics
Social Sciences	Economics Education Political Science Social Science
Humanities	Art/Music/Dance Languages & Literature Foundation Studies/Humanities Journalism History/Philosophy
Technical Fields	Apprentice Programs Automobile & Aviation Climate Control Technology Computer Aided Design Computer Integrated Manufacturing Electrical/Electronics Industrial Sciences Mechanical/Fluid Systems
Personal Development	Hobbies Physical Education
Business	Accounting Business Administration Business Information Systems Communications
Public Service	EMT/Firefighter Food Service Law Enforcement

[7] The remainder of the transactions (5 cases) did not have accurate gender information

We compared actual enrollment in these curriculum areas to withdrawal rate (Table 2). The withdraw percentage from natural and physical science is higher than the percentage of enrollments. For allied health and public service areas the withdraw percentage is half of the percentage of enrollment.

Table 2: Duplicated Course Enrollments and Withdrawal Percentage by Curriculum Area

Curriculum Area	Enrollment Percentage	Withdrawal Percentage
Allied Health	5.0	2.2
Applied/Technical	10.8	10.8
Business	10.9	9.4
Humanities	26.1	22.8
Natural/Physical Sciences	20.7	36.7
Personal Enrichment	6.5	3.9
Public Service	2.5	1.2
Social Sciences	17.5	13.0

Analysis of Research Question 1 - *"Are there differences in withdrawal patterns among students enrolled in courses from different curricular areas?"*

Table 3 shows the total percentage of withdrawals at the College for one calendar year. The curricular areas are provided to show where the majority of withdrawal activity occurs. The total is further divided by male and female students. There are differences between male and female students in some curricular areas. For instance, the large difference seen in the Applied /Technical area represents a disproportionate number of male students enrolled in those courses.

Table 3: Students withdrawing by Curriculum Area Percentage by Gender

Curriculum Area	All Withdraws	Female	Male
Allied Health	2.2	3.0	1.1
Applied/Technical	10.8	7.4	14.9
Business	9.4	10.4	8.2
Humanities	22.8	22.9	22.7
Natural/Physical Sciences	36.7	36.3	37.2
Personal Enrichment	3.9	4.8	2.9
Public Service	1.2	0.7	1.9
Social Sciences	13.0	14.5	11.1

We further looked at the data by gender and ethnicity combined as we thought there might be differences in withdrawal patterns along ethnic and gender lines (Table 4). We found that the withdrawal pattern among minority students was not substantially different from non-minority (white) students. Minority males comprise a larger proportion of withdrawals from humanities course than do white males, while white males make up a larger proportion of withdrawals from Applied/Technical courses than do minority males. Differences in withdrawal patterns of minority female and white female students was small.

Table 4: Students withdrawing by Curriculum Area
Percentage by Ethnicity & Gender

		Minority		Non-Minority	
Curriculum Area	**All Withdraws**	**Female**	**Male**	**Female**	**Male**
Allied Health	2.2	3.1	1.5	3.2	1.2
Applied/Technical	10.8	7.4	12.1	7.2	16.2
Business	9.4	10.5	7.4	10.4	8.1
Humanities	22.8	22.9	25.1	23.5	21.8
Natural/Physical Sciences	36.7	36.6	37.5	35.8	36.7
Personal Enrichment	3.9	4.3	2.7	4.8	2.9
Public Service	1.2	0.3	1.3	0.8	2.3
Social Sciences	13.0	15.3	11.4	14.2	10.8

We hypothesized that we would have a greater proportion of withdrawal transactions from students who had come to the college academically underprepared, than from more prepared students. However, as Table 5 shows, this is not necessarily true across all curricular areas. Only the Social Sciences show a lowering of the proportion of withdrawals as the preparedness of the students increases in both men and women. For women, the proportion increases as the level of preparedness increases for Applied/Technical courses.

Table 5: Students withdrawing by Curriculum Area
Percentage by Level of Preparedness & Gender

Female

Curriculum Area	Female Withdraws	Level of Preparedness* Least (0)	1	2	Most (3)
Allied Health	3.0	3.7	3.4	2.5	1.2
Applied/Technical	7.4	6.0	6.9	7.7	16.2
Business	10.4	9.7	11.1	9.4	8.1
Humanities	22.9	23.6	21.2	32.3	21.8
Natural/Physical Sciences	36.3	35.2	38.1	29.8	36.7
Personal Enrichment	4.8	4.7	4.6	4.2	2.9
Public Service	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.2	2.3
Social Sciences	14.5	16.5	14.2	14.0	10.8

Male

Curriculum Area	Male Withdraws	Level of Preparedness* Least (0)	1	2	Most (3)
Allied Health	1.1	1.2	1.5	0.9	1.1
Applied/Technical	14.9	15.5	13.3	10.6	11.2
Business	8.2	7.5	8.4	7.8	9.6
Humanities	22.7	23.5	23.2	26.9	26.4
Natural/Physical Sciences	37.2	35.3	36.3	37.5	34.9
Personal Enrichment	2.9	2.2	3.7	3.2	3.1
Public Service	1.9	2.3	3.5	1.3	2.0
Social Sciences	11.1	12.5	10.1	11.8	11.6

* Preparedness was measured by scores on entrance exam (ASSET)

The analysis shows that the proportion of withdrawals across curriculum areas measured against cumulative GPA also differs from our expectations. We theorized that students with high GPAs would withdraw at lower rates than students with low GPAs (or students who were new to the college and therefore have a 0.0 GPA). We instead found that there was considerable consistency across GPA in withdrawal patterns for both men and women in all curricular areas.

The analysis by age group (Table 6) shows substantial differences in withdrawal patterns across both curricular area and gender. Age groups were defined as follows: 18-21 "traditional," 22-31 "generation X," 32-54 "boomers" and 55 and above "seniors." As a portion of overall female withdrawals in the Allied Health area, older women ("seniors") tend to withdraw more frequently than younger women. However, senior women comprise a smaller proportion of

withdrawals from the Natural/Physical Sciences than do their younger counterparts. For men, "seniors" represent a substantially smaller portion of withdrawals from Applied/Technical courses than younger males.

Table 6: Students withdrawing by Curriculum Area
Percentage by Age Group & Gender

Female

		Age Group			
Curriculum Area	**Female Withdraws**	**Traditional**	**Gen. X**	**Boomers**	**Seniors**
Allied Health	3.0	2.1	2.9	3.9	6.4
Applied/Technical	7.4	4.2	6.7	11.8	14.5
Business	10.4	5.7	11.0	12.3	16.4
Humanities	22.9	25.7	22.6	21.6	19.1
Natural/Physical Sciences	36.3	39.0	35.9	35.0	28.2
Personal Enrichment	4.8	4.7	4.9	4.5	3.6
Public Service	0.7	0.3	0.8	0.7	0.9
Social Sciences	14.5	18.2	15.1	10.1	10.9

Male

		Age Group			
Curriculum Area	**Male Withdraws**	**Traditional**	**Gen. X**	**Boomers**	**Seniors**
Allied Health	1.1	0.3	1.3	1.8	0.0
Applied/Technical	14.9	6.5	14.7	27.5	37.3
Business	8.2	5.8	8.7	9.2	5.9
Humanities	22.7	29.8	21.7	16.9	25.5
Natural/Physical Sciences	37.2	39.0	37.5	34.3	19.6
Personal Enrichment	2.9	3.8	2.8	1.7	3.9
Public Service	1.9	1.1	2.3	1.1	0.0
Social Sciences	11.1	13.8	11.0	7.5	7.8

Complete Withdrawals

As mentioned earlier in the paper, our analysis considers only those students who are withdrawing from a single course. In this section we conduct preliminary analysis of withdrawal transactions which resulted in *complete* withdrawal from the college. Therefore, the students represented in this analysis withdrew from their only course. In Table 7 students completely withdrawing from the college are shown by gender across curriculum areas. When comparing these percentages to Table 2, small differences are apparent, although the overall pattern is consistent with the *partial* withdrawals. One noticeable difference is that the proportion of

students *completely* withdrawing from personal enrichment courses is less than the proportion of students *partially* withdrawing from those courses.

Table 7: Students completely withdrawing by Curriculum Area Percentage by Gender

Curriculum Area	All Withdraws	Female	Male
Allied Health	2.5	3.4	1.3
Applied/Technical	13.7	8.2	20.9
Business	10.4	12.3	7.7
Humanities	21.8	22.6	20.6
Natural/Physical Sciences	35.7	35.8	35.6
Personal Enrichment	2.6	3.0	2.1
Public Service	1.5	0.9	2.4
Social Sciences	11.9	13.7	9.5

When looking at racial/ethnic and gender differences in *complete* vs. *partial* withdrawal (see Table 8 compared to Table 3), we also find a similar pattern. A considerable difference does appear when comparing *complete* withdrawal in applied/technical areas to *partial* withdrawals in that area. Specifically, when the withdrawal represents an applied/technical course, that withdrawal is more likely to be *complete* rather than *partial* for both minority and non-minority men.

Table 8: Students completely withdrawing by Curriculum Area Percentage by Ethnicity & Gender

		Minority		Non-Minority	
Curriculum Area	All Withdraws	Female	Male	Female	Male
Allied Health	2.5	3.0	1.6	3.5	1.5
Applied/Technical	13.7	8.5	16.7	7.8	22.2
Business	10.4	10.1	8.9	12.9	7.3
Humanities	21.8	24.2	21.3	23.2	20.5
Natural/Physical Sciences	35.7	36.9	35.7	34.6	34.8
Personal Enrichment	2.6	3.2	3.1	3.1	2.0
Public Service	1.5	0.0	3.1	1.1	2.8
Social Sciences	11.9	13.8	9.7	13.8	8.9

For space considerations, we have not presented a detailed analysis of all the variables (as was seen in the analysis of the *partial* withdrawals). The overall pattern for *complete* withdrawals remains consistent with the pattern established in the *partial* withdrawal analysis (see Tables 2 - 6). As in the examples used for Tables 7 and 8 there are a few notable differences in *complete* withdrawal patterns compared to *partial* withdrawals. Future studies will attempt to illuminate those differences.

Analysis of Research Question 2- *"What is the relationship between gender, race/ethnicity, student academic preparation, and age group, and self-reported reasons for withdrawal?"*

Partial Withdrawals

Students were asked to select from a list of twelve possible "reasons for withdrawal." Based on that list we have grouped student responses into two categories: "reason within college control," and "reason not within college control." Since the variables represent student self-reports and students were given the opportunity to respond with more than one reason for their withdrawal, there are some inherent difficulties in creating these groups. However, it is clear that a response to some items are course or college related while others are personal. Table 9 depicts responses by men and women for various withdrawal reasons. For all respondents regardless of gender, age, ethic/racial group, preparedness, and GPA, "Course too hard" was the most frequent response *within the college's control*, while "conflict with work" was the most frequent response overall and *not within the college's control*.

Table 9: Students withdrawing by Reason
Percentage by Gender

Reason within College Control	**Female**	**Male**	**Total**
Conflict with Instructor	5.9	4.6	5.3
Course not what Expected	13.6	12.4	13.1
Course Scheduling Conflict	7.0	6.7	6.9
Course too Easy	1.0	1.3	1.1
Course too Hard	17.9	14.9	16.6
Registration Error	2.0	2.1	2.0
Reason not within College Control	**Female**	**Male**	**Total**
Child Care Problems	4.1	0.9	2.7
Conflict with work	30.4	43.4	36.2
Financial reasons	3.9	3.9	3.9
Medical Reasons	8.4	3.9	6.4
Moving out of the area	1.2	5.0	1.2
Personal Reason	28.4	26.0	27.3
Transportation Problems	4.2	5.0	4.6

The number of students indicating multiple reasons for their withdrawal are shown on Table 10. The majority of students (70.4%) only identified one withdrawal reason. The most frequent responses within each category have been given a more detailed analysis in this section.

Table 10: Number of Withdrawal Reasons
Percentage responding to multiple reasons

Number of Reasons	**Percentage**
0	5.3
1	70.4
2	17.9
3	4.9
4	1.2
5	0.2

The withdrawal form specifically asks students if the college could have prevented their withdrawal (the student's interpretation of what is in the college's control). If the student indicated that their withdrawal could have been prevented by the college, a separate analysis was completed to determine the student's reason for withdrawal. As shown in Table 11, the five strongest "reasons for withdrawal' (those with percentages over 15%) are "conflict with instructor" (24.8%), "course not what I expected" (24.4%), "course too hard" (24.4%), "conflict

with work" (22.6%), and "personal reasons" (15.3%). Students self-determinations of what is in the college's control and/or assumptions about reasons within the college's control show a disparity.

Table 11: Could the college have done anything to prevent you from leaving?
Percentage Responding "Yes" by Withdawal reason

Reason within College Control	**Percent "Yes"**
Conflict with Instructor	24.8
Course not what Expect	24.4
Course Scheduling Conflict	9.0
Course too Easy	1.3
Course too Hard	24.4
Registration Error	5.2
Reason not within College Control	**Percent "Yes"**
Child Care problems	2.2
Conflict with work	22.6
Financial reasons	4.6
Medical reason	5.1
Moving out of area	0.7
Personal reasons	15.3
Transportation problems	3.9

From each of the two categories ("reasons within college control" and "reason not within college control") we have selected the most frequently occurring reasons for withdrawal. A detailed analysis of "course too hard" and "conflict with work" by gender, ethnic/racial, preparedness and GPA appears in Tables 12 and 13. Among the findings is that female students indicate "course too hard" more often than men, while men state "conflict with work" more frequently than women. "senior" women are much less likely to cite either "course too hard" or "conflict with work" as reasons for their withdrawal than are women from the other age groups. However, "senior" men, while less likely to cite "course too hard" than are other men, are as likely as their younger counterparts to indicate "conflict with work."

Table 12: Women withdrawing by Reasons: "Course too Hard" & "Conflict with Work"
Percentage by Ethnicity, Preparedness, GPA, Age

Reason	All Withdraws	Minority	Non-Minority
Course too Hard	17.9	18.5	17.3
Conflict with Work	30.4	26.1	31.6

Level of Preparedness*

Reason	All Withdraws	Least (0)	1	2	Most (3)
Course too Hard	19.0	21.5	17.8	18.4	16.4
Conflict with Work	30.3	26.2	32.5	31.8	32.8

Cumulative GPA

Reason	All Withdraws	No GPA	Less Than 1.0	1.0 - 1.9	2.0 -2.9	3.0 and above
Course too Hard	17.9	22.1	17.7	21.2	19.7	14.7
Conflict with Work	30.4	27.2	29.0	29.2	30.4	31.6

Age Group

Reason	All Withdraws	Traditional	Gen. X	Boomers	Seniors
Course too Hard	17.9	27.3	16.8	12.9	8.5
Conflict with Work	30.4	26.9	31.7	30.1	18.9

Table 13: Men withdrawing by Reasons: "Course too Hard" & "Conflict with Work"
Percentage by Ethnicity, Preparedness, GPA, Age

Reason	All Withdraws	Minority	Non-Minority
Course too Hard	15.2	15.2	15.2
Conflict with Work	43.4	39.7	44.8

Level of Preparedness*

Reason	All Withdraws	Least (0)	1	2	Most (3)
Course too Hard	15.5	17.7	14.0	16.2	13.7
Conflict with Work	43.3	42.1	44.9	43.7	41.5

Cumulative GPA

Reason	All Withdraws	No GPA	Less Than 1.0	1.0 - 1.9	2.0 -2.9	3.0 and above
Course too Hard	15.2	16.9	11.5	17.6	16.5	12.1
Conflict with Work	43.4	41.1	34.6	40.5	42.8	46.6

Age Group

Reason	All Withdraws	Traditional	Gen. X	Boomers	Seniors
Course too Hard	15.2	23.5	13.9	10.4	2.1
Conflict with Work	43.4	31.9	45.6	48.6	38.3

We assumed that students indicating "registration error" and "scheduling conflicts" would withdraw in equal proportions across curriculum areas. Using a Chi-Square Analysis, we determined that there were no differences between overall withdrawal patterns and withdrawal specific to "registration error" and "scheduling conflicts" (See Table 15). However, we found that for women, "conflict with instructor," "course too hard," and "course not what I expected" were significantly different from the overall withdrawal patterns. For men, "conflict with instructor" was not significantly different, but "course too easy" showed significant difference from the expected value.

When comparing withdrawal reasons determined to be "within the college's control" with curriculum areas we find substantial differences. Notably, students (both men and women) who cite "course too hard" as their reason for withdrawal are much more likely to be in the natural/physical sciences. Conversely, students who indicate "course too easy" are more likely to be withdrawing from courses in the humanities.

Table 15: Reasons for Student Withdraw by Curriculum Area and Gender
Percent responding to each reason. Chi Square Analysis

Female		Withdraw reasons within College Control					
	Withdraws	Cw/I	RE	CEasy	CHard	SC	CNWE
Allied Health	3.0	1.4	5.7	1.2	1.7	3.4	2.5
Business	10.4	10.1	10.9	10.5	8.8	8.8	10.5
Humanities	22.9	21.7	17.8	32.6	12.7	27.6	28.3
Public Service	0.7	0.0	1.1	1.2	0.3	0.8	0.4
Natural/Physical Sciences	36.3	43.7	34.5	24.4	59.4	31.5	27.5
Social Sciences	14.5	15.7	13.8	7.0	9.9	15.8	15.6
Applied/Technical	7.4	7.0	9.2	17.4	6.6	6.5	10.9
Personal Enrichment	4.8	0.6	6.9	5.8	0.5	5.4	4.2
Difference between Reason and Total Withdraws		p > .001	ns	ns	p > .001	ns	p > .001

Male		Withdraw reasons within College Control					
	Withdraws	Cw/I	RE	CEasy	CHard	SC	CNWE
Allied Health	1.1	1.2	3.4	1.1	0.8	1.9	1.6
Business	8.2	8.4	4.8	5.6	7.2	7.7	7.6
Humanities	22.7	21.7	23.4	42.2	11.0	22.2	30.8
Public Service	1.9	0.3	1.4	0.0	0.8	2.8	0.7
Natural/Physical Sciences	37.2	43.2	31.7	22.2	60.4	37.3	27.1
Social Sciences	11.1	10.9	11.7	5.6	6.8	11.3	12.7
Applied/Technical	14.9	13.0	19.3	17.8	12.5	12.6	17.5
Personal Enrichment	2.9	1.2	4.1	5.6	0.5	4.3	2.1
Difference between Reason and Total Withdraws		ns	ns	p > .001	p > .001	ns	p > .001

Complete Withdrawals

An analysis of students *completely* withdrawing from the college indicates that their reasons for withdrawal are different from those of students *partially* withdrawing. Table 16 shows that students *completely* withdrawing from the college indicate "conflict with work, " "medical reasons," and "transportation problems" more often than do *partially* withdrawing students. Course-based reasons for withdrawal (e.g., "course too hard," "course not what I expected") were indicated less frequently for *completely* withdrawing students than for *partial* withdrawals.

Table 16: Students Completely Withdrawing by Reason
Percentage by Gender

Reason within College Control	**Female**	**Male**	**Total**
Conflict with Instructor	4.0	2.9	3.5
Course not what Expected	10.7	8.4	9.7
Course Scheduling Conflict	5.5	5.1	5.3
Course too Easy	1.0	0.9	1.0
Course too Hard	12.1	9.0	10.8
Registration Error	1.9	1.8	1.9
Reason not within College Control	**Female**	**Male**	**Total**
Child Care Problems	4.0	1.1	2.8
Conflict with work	34.7	51.7	42.1
Financial reasons	4.5	4.5	4.5
Medical Reasons	10.6	4.6	8.0
Moving out of the area	2.3	2.6	2.4
Personal Reason	28.3	22.9	26.0
Transportation Problems	3.1	4.6	3.7

Again, we see that the majority of withdrawal transactions only included one reason for that withdrawal (72.1%). Those students who are completely withdrawing from the college are more likely to list only one reason for that withdrawal, and are less likely to list multiple reasons than are partially withdrawing students.

Table 17: Number of Complete Withdrawal Reasons
Percentage responding to multiple reasons

Number of Reasons	**Percentage**
0	5.5
1	72.1
2	16.4
3	3.5
4	1.0
5	0.1

Table 18 shows the percentages of male and female students who intend to re-enroll after *completely* withdrawing from the college, but also believe the college could have prevented their withdrawal. A substantial difference is that men are more likely to say that they will not re-enroll than are women.

Table18: Completely Withdrawing Students Who Intend to Re-enroll
Percentage by Those Indicating College Could have Prevented Withdrav

	Do you Intend to Re-enroll		
Gender	**Yes**	**No**	**Unsure**
Female	62.2	19.7	18.1
Male	63.2	23.3	13.5

Analysis of Research Question 3- *"To what extent do students discuss their withdrawal with teachers and counselors?"*

The college provides students with faculty counselors who are assigned to meet with individual students regarding their course taking and other academic needs. Student's withdrawing from a course are encouraged (but not required) to meet with their counselor or their instructor before making that transaction. As noted earlier, students who withdraw after the 11th week of classes must see their instructor if they wish to receive a "W" instead of an "F" on their transcript. In the present study, we do not present analysis of the frequency of student withdrawals that looks at withdrawals that occur after the 11th week. We see in Table 19 that women are more likely to discuss their withdrawal with college counselors than with their course instructors. Men are more likely to discuss their withdrawal with instructors rather than college counselors. Both men and women are more likely to discuss their withdrawal with their instructors than with counselors.

Table 19: Students Who Discussed Their Withdrawal with Counselor
Percentage by Gender

Discussed Withdrawal	**Female**	**Male**
With Counselor	11.1	9.4
With Instructor	17.5	19.7

Narrative Information from Completely Withdrawing Students

When a student is completely withdrawing from the college, he/she is asked to indicate whether the college could have prevented that withdrawal. A small space is provided for the student to elaborate (in their own words) about what they feel the college could have done to prevent the withdrawal. More than 1,200 students who withdrew entirely felt the college could have prevented the withdrawal. The following section includes a sample of the comments received from those students. The narratives fell into several categories. Some of the more prominent themes fell into the categories of transferability of courses, catalog descriptions, prerequisites, advising, quality of instruction, attendance policies, laboratory and class scheduling conflicts, cost of supplies, and inflexibility of exam dates. A sample of some narratives that represent some of the more frequently occurring themes is presented below.

Transferability of Courses

Some students indicated that they withdrew from the course because of difficulty in transfering the course, or because they believe they received inaccurate information about the course's transferability. Narratives regarding transferability included:

"I was told the course would transfer, and the counselor at my college told me it cannot transfer."

"I was informed that this class not only won't transfer, but does not fulfill the general education requirement."

Catalog Descriptions of Courses

Many comments from students highlighted the need for the college to keep abreast of the catalog descriptions that are provided to students. We find a number of comments specifically having to do with the course catalog either being vague, outdated, or simply inaccurate.

"Course description should reflect the true nature of the course"

"There should be a better description of the course... it was too difficult"

"Coursework intensity should have been specified in the College Catalog. Class provided too much depth for an intro course."

Prerequisites

Additionally, many students indicate that they are withdrawing from the course because of the fact that they were unaware of or unclear about the type of prerequisites they would need to be successful in that course.

> "The catalog specifies MAT 115 as a prerequisite, but you really also need Trig."

Advising

Some students expressed concern over the type of advice they were receiving from instructors and academic counselors at the college.

> "They could have informed me when I asked, that I didn't need this class..."
>
> "If I had been informed of this penalty (lost tuition dollars for late withdrawal) and consulted with the instructor, I would not be caught in this web."
>
> "From what I understand, I should have taken other accounting courses before I started with this one. And my counselor did not make me aware of this."

Quality of Instruction

Students frequently mentioned concerns that had to do with the quality of instruction they were receiving in the class. The present analysis does not investigate patterns of withdrawal for individual courses or instructors, and such an analysis would present some difficult ethical dilemmas for any future study. It might be possible to address the concerns students voice through professional development activities that include both full-time and adjunct faculty.

> "The instructor was obnoxious"
>
> "The instructor could be more helpful to help students in trouble"
>
> "The college only gives us one week after the beginning date to withdraw. The first class, the instructor told us what supplies would be needed and nothing to do with the class itself."

The comments above are representative of the *types* of concerns students mentioned, and suggest that there might be some utility in beginning conversations with faculty about student assistance, professional demeanor and introductions to particular courses.

Future studies will be devoted to a systematic analysis of narrative comments and will consider patterns we might see in these themes. Of particular interest is the notion of how age, gender, race, and disciplinary group might the student's comments regarding their withdrawal.

Limitations

This analysis is an exploratory study of patterns of student withdrawal at one large, suburban, multi-campus community college. The use of student self-reported data presents unique problems of interpretation, including that students interpret the suggested "reasons for withdrawal" in different ways. Some "reasons" were more problematic than others; for instance, "registration error" may be interpreted as being an error on the College's part, or an error on the student's part. The different interpretations significantly alter the implications of findings related to that variable.

As we noted earlier, we only analyzed the withdrawal transactions that represented withdrawal from a single course. The *Student Withdrawal Form* is designed to allow the student to withdraw from more than one course on the form, making it impossible to determine which of the reason(s) the student cited for the withdrawal apply to which course. Our way of assuring that we were understanding the correct "reason for withdrawal" for the course was to only consider single course withdrawals in the present study. A recommendation will be made that when the form is updated in the future, this problem be discussed and addressed.

Students are allowed to include more than one reason for withdrawal from a course on the same form. While this is a difficulty from the standpoint of analysis, we are also cognizant of the fact that students frequently do have more than one reason for withdrawal. It is not our recommendation that the form be altered to remove the possibility of citing more than one reason for withdrawal; rather, we suggest that additional studies be done that mesh other pieces of information from students in order to further understand the dynamics behind course withdrawals.

Discussion

Compared to actual enrollments, partially withdrawing students withdraw from courses in the natural and physical sciences at a disproportionate rate. Since mathematics represents the largest number of students within this group, we suggest that students may be poorly prepared for college-level mathematics, and may find themselves overwhelmed with the difficulty of those courses. This may also be tied to the fact that some mathematics and science courses are required for general education requirements. The difficulty of these courses, combined with the fact that students may be taking them simply because they are required to do so, and may have very little

personal interest in the content of the courses may lead to higher withdrawal rates. We also see that some curricular areas, such as Allied Health and Public Service have much lower withdrawal rates than their enrollments would suggest. Courses in those areas may be more closely aligned with the student's career goals and interests, making it more likely that the student will remain in the course to the end. It is also interesting to note that when students withdraw from natural/physical science courses they are more likely to retain other courses at the college, while when they with draw from courses in applied/technical fields, they are more likely to be departing from the college entirely. We suggest that students who are enrolled in applied/technical courses are often taking those courses for job skills or other career-related reasons. Whereas, for many students, natural/physical science courses are considered required parts of their curriculum.

For both *partial* and *complete* withdrawals, there were few differences across curriculum areas for gender and racial/ethnic groups. The location of the community college, within an affluent, suburban school district, may have some influence on students' preparation and achievement at the community college level. A large proportion of students at the college have attended local elementary and secondary schools that are considered strong and are well supported in the community. For this study, we did not have a measure of socio-economic status. Future studies may find that, for students at this particular college, socio-economic status plays a significant role in student withdrawal.

With regard to grade point averages and entry-level academic preparedness, there were few results that showed any differences across curriculum areas for women/men and for minority/non-minority status. In this study, we are unable to compare withdrawal rates with the actual enrollment by gender and minority status. Because of this, it is impossible to draw conclusions about the effect of GPA and academic preparedness on student withdrawal.

We did find some interesting differences in withdrawal patterns with regard to age. Specifically, we found that "seniors" are less likely to withdraw from courses in the natural/physical sciences than are their younger counterparts, and are more likely to withdraw from courses in the applied/technical fields and business. Lower withdrawal rates from the natural/physical sciences may reflect "seniors'" taking courses in those areas for personal interest rather than as a requirement. "Seniors'" higher withdrawal rates from applied/technical and business areas may reflect the substantial career-relatedness of those fields. "Seniors" are less

likely to indicate "course too hard," and are less likely to indicate "conflict with work" as their reason for withdrawal. "Seniors" are thought to be more likely to be attending college to attain a higher level of education, and their attendance may be unrelated to career aspirations.

By far, the most common reason cited for withdrawal was "conflict with work." This emphasizes the need for community colleges to provide flexible scheduling for the large number of students who are employed. This is further emphasized by the fact that men who *completely* withdraw cite "conflict with work" over 50% of the time, and women cite "conflict with work" 42% of the time. While colleges may feel that student work conflicts are not within their control, it has become clear from our research that many students (22%) believe that it is. Attrition of students for work-related reasons clearly has an economic impact on colleges such as this one.

We did see some substantial differences between men and women with regard to withdrawal for "childcare" and "medical reasons," with women indicating those as their reasons for withdrawal much more frequently than men. While the percentage of women who cite those reasons is small (childcare = 4%, and medical = 8%), the number of students these percentages represent is substantial . This highlights the need for colleges to continue to provide assistance to students for whom childcare is a stumbling block toward getting their education. Further, it is important for colleges to be flexible and understanding when students are faced with unexpected medical problems.

Consideration of the narrative responses provides additional information that is unclear from the quantitative analysis. Student narrative comments regarding their withdrawal point to the fact that there are subtle distinctions that need to be made with regard to various "reasons for withdrawal," and that the list of reasons provided on the withdrawal form is by no means complete. Close inspection of narrative responses may reveal areas in which the college may want to invest resources. These student comments may help the college to determine areas of need and may guide the college to greater "student-centeredness."

This study is expected to prompt discussion at the college about areas for future research, and to allow for informed decision making regarding curricular issues. The data used for this paper is very rich and constantly-expanding. We have suggested several areas in which future research is needed, and have also suggested additions to the database that would make for more powerful analysis in future studies.

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[redacted]

Student Withdrawal Form

ADS 31 - 9/93

White - Registration
Yellow - Institutional Planning & Analysis
Pink - Student

Please complete by printing clearly in ink.

Name: _____
Last First MI

Social Security Number ___ — ___ — ____

Daytime Phone No. (area code) ( ) —

Home Campus:

1☐ [redacted]
2☐ [redacted]
3☐ [redacted]
4☐ [redacted]
5☐ [redacted]

Indicate the Session and Year:

1☐ Winter 4☐ Summer
2☐ Spring 5☐ Fall
3☐ Spring/Summer

19 _____ (year)

Financial Aid Recipients: *Dropping courses or completely withdrawing from school could affect both your current financial aid award and your eligibility for future financial aid. It is recommended that you contact the Financial Aid Office before withdrawing.*

1. Are you receiving:
   VA Benefits ☐ Yes ☐ No Registered Credits **before** this transaction: _____
   Social Security Benefits ☐ Yes ☐ No
   Financial Aid ☐ Yes ☐ No Registered Credits **after** this transaction: _____

2. Reason(s) for withdrawal (check all that apply):
   ☐ Transportation problems ☐ Medical reasons ☐ Course scheduling conflict
   ☐ Conflict with work ☐ Child care problems ☐ Personal reasons
   ☐ Moving out of the area ☐ Registration error ☐ Course was not what I expected
   ☐ Financial reasons ☐ Course too difficult ☐ Other (Please specify): _____
   ☐ Conflict with instructor ☐ Course too easy _____

3. If you are withdrawing from all your courses, do you intend to re-enroll at OCC at a later date?
   1☐ Yes 9☐ No 7☐ Unsure 8☐ Does not apply

4. Have you discussed your withdrawal with your [redacted] instructor(s)? ..... 1☐ Yes 9☐ No

5. Have you discussed your withdrawal with an [redacted] counselor? ..... 1☐ Yes 9☐ No

6. Would you like someone from [redacted] to contact you to discuss your withdrawal or your future educational needs? 1☐ Yes 9☐ No

7. Could anything under [redacted] control have prevented your withdrawal? ..... 1☐ Yes 9☐ No

If YES, please specify: _____

_____

Course Code	Section No. (Alpha Numeric)	Course Title	Credits	Office Use Only (Processed)

Student's Signature _____ Date _____

30

PLEASE DO NOT MARK IN SHADED AREA

Effective Period _____

Today's Date _____ **Authorized Signature** _____